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AUTHOR Costanzo, William V.
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ABSTRACT

Many teachers would like to counter what Deborah Tannen calls "The Argument Culture." They recognize that teaching students traditional principles of argument may perpetuate the kind of adversarial thinking that erupts all too often: in aggressive newspaper headlines, on confrontational television shows, in court rooms, and in school yards across the country. An alternative is to teach the skills of conflict resolution. This paper presents a sequence of six classroom exercises leading to a writing assignment in which students are asked to mediate in the resolution of a conflict instead of arguing "persuasively" for one side. (EF)

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Friendly Alternatives to the Argumentative Essay

Presented at the NCTE 90th Conference in Milwaukee, WI, November 17, 2000
By William V. Costanzo, Professor of English
SUNY/Westchester Community College, Valhalla, NY 10595
Bill.Costanzo@sunywcc.edu

Many teachers would like to counter what Deborah Tannen calls "The Argument Culture." We recognize that teaching students traditional principles of argument may perpetuate the kind of adversarial thinking that erupts around us all too often: in aggressive newspaper headlines, on confrontational television shows, in court rooms, and in schoolyards across the country. An alternative is to teach the skills of conflict resolution. What follows is a sequence of six classroom exercises leading to a writing assignment in which students are asked to mediate in the resolution of a conflict instead of arguing "persuasively" for one side. These materials are adapted from a forthcoming textbook for first-year college writers to be published by McGraw-Hill.

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1. The Language of Conflict

Topic: How does our culture represent conflict through language?

Group Exercise: Look for examples of conflict in newspaper headlines (battle imagery, boxing metaphors). List sayings that express "common wisdom" about conflict ("If you're not a winner, you're a loser." "There are two sides to every argument."). Compare popular television shows dealing with controversy (*Face-off, Hard Ball, Jerry Springer*).

Discuss: What beliefs about conflict do these examples represent and perpetuate?

Belief Scale. List some common beliefs about conflict (conflicts lead to fights, the world is made up of winners and losers). Create a scale (one to ten) for each, asking students to say how strongly they agree or disagree. Discuss where these beliefs come from.

2. Attentive Listening

Exercise in Pairs. One student interviews the other with four questions: "What is a recent conflict you (or someone you know) was involved in?" "What was the conflict about? Who was involved? What was the outcome?" Each interview is conducted twice. The first time, the interviewer shows as little interest as possible (avoiding eye contact, yawning, interrupting, folding arms). The second time, the interviewer practices attentive listening (focused, caring, empathetic). Then the pair switches roles, the interviewer becoming the interviewee.

Discuss: What was it like to be listened to half-heartedly? What were the signs of inattentive listening? What difference did attentive listening make in how you felt and what you said? What cues (tone, body language, choice of words) enabled you to speak differently the second time? Were there any misunderstandings triggered by language?

How Conflicts Grow. Make an event tree (or flow chart) for each conflict to show how one event led to another. How easy it is to trace the conflict back to its origins? What contributed most to the conflict? If the conflict is over, what led to its resolution? If not, where do you think it will lead?

3. Problem Solving

The Human Knot. Eight volunteers stand in a circle facing each other. Each person reaches across with the right hand to hold another person's right hand. Then everyone reaches with the left hand for the left hand of a different person. This forms the knot. The goal is to untangle the knot without unclasping hands. Try this exercise twice, with and without outside help.

Discuss: What did you notice about the way this problem was solved? How well did an outsider's perspective help?

Tangled Roles. The knot exercise is richer with a variation that accounts for individual needs, or underlying motives. Before beginning, give each person an instruction card. Each card will list the same common goal of untying the knot, but three or four will also include secondary "needs," such as "you need to be in charge," "capture the attention of someone in the group," "be sure that everyone is happy." The people with these needs will play those roles during the untangling.

Discuss: Did you notice people behaving differently? Can you identify any special interests or needs that might explain this behavior? How did these needs affect the group's ability to solve the common problem?

4. Positions and Interests.

Return to the conflicts identified during the listening exercise. This time, the goal is to analyze the conflict, separating positions from interests. What positions did each person in the conflict take? What interests (underlying needs or motives) might have led to these positions? For example, in a conflict over curfews, the mother might take the position "be home by ten," the daughter's position might be to challenge the curfew, and these positions might escalate into threats and reprisals. The mother might be seen as controlling or as concerned for her daughter's safety (her interests). The daughter's interests might include a desire to have more freedom or to be "like all the other girls." Positions are usually easier to identify because they are spoken or acted out. Interests often require some analysis. Asking why positions were taken in the first place can often uncover needs and interests motivated by past experience ("The last time you stayed out late, you got into trouble.") or future goals ("I want to be accepted by my friends.").

5. Expanding Options.

Group Exercise. Select a conflict for which you have identified the positions people take and their underlying needs, and brainstorm as many options as you can. The object is to invent solutions beyond the positions taken. What other outcomes are possible? For the first stage of this exercise, be open to all possibilities, no matter how far-fetched. Turn off the censor. Judgments and decisions will come later.

Consider these prompts to help generate ideas:

- Can the pie be cut in different ways? (One person likes the crust; the other likes the filling).
- Can the pie be expanded?
- What would different kinds of people suggest? (a child, a biker, a business executive, a romantic, Seinfeld, Oprah?)
- How might the problem be met with avoidance, postponement, aggression, or assertiveness?
- Up the ante: what if your life depended on a resolution?

6. Choosing Alternatives.

Establish objective standards for judging which options would work best. What basic principles seem most reasonable and fair? For example, if the conflict is about a student's grade, what measures for assessing the student's work would be impartial and appropriate? Look for areas of mutual gain. Involve all parties in the selection of criteria. Then comb through the ideas generated in the previous exercise, applying these standards you agreed on to find a reasonable resolution to the conflict.

Writing Assignment: Resolving a Conflict

When two sides find it difficult to agree in an ongoing dispute, they sometimes seek the assistance of a mediator, a third party who is not involved in the dispute. The mediator's role is to help both sides reach a resolution. This may be some middle ground satisfactory to everyone or an entirely new solution that the disputing sides could not envision on their own. Because the mediator is not attached to any particular position and because the mediator's goal is a fair, mutually acceptable resolution, this approach often produces positive results.

Roger Fisher and William Ury give a good example in their bestseller, *Getting to Yes*:

> Consider the story of two men quarreling in a library. One wants the window open and the other wants it closed. They bicker back and forth about how much to leave it open: a crack, halfway, three-quarters of the way. No solution satisfies them both.
>
> Enter the librarian. She asks one why he wants the window open: "To get some fresh air." She asks the other why he wants it closed: "To avoid the draft." After thinking a minute, she opens wide a window in the next room, bringing in fresh air without a draft. (40)

For this paper, you act as the mediator between opposing sides of a debate. You seek to understand the positions of both sides, to clarify their underlying interests, and to appreciate their immediate and long-range concerns. At the same time, you invent new options that might resolve the disagreement and consider them in the light of objective standards. In this way, you get to practice principles and skills of conflict resolution that will serve you well in nearly every corner arena of your daily life.

Your topic may be a personal disagreement (like a dispute over a salary, a possession, or a grade) or a global conflict (between hostile nations, competing ideologies, or groups with different goals, like ecologists and land developers). Choose a topic in which you have a genuine interest but about which you can be reasonably objective. Your purpose is not to take sides; it is to reconcile the opposing sides.

The essay should include a clear description of the conflict and present each side's point of view. You might begin with a brief history of the dispute to show what led to the problem. Since there are at least two sides to every argument, you should summarize the main positions of each side. Find out what the people involved really think by investigating their beliefs through reading, live interviews, broadcasts, or the Internet. Try to present each position as accurately and strongly as if it were your own.

Show that you understand not only what the conflicting sides believe and why they believe it but also how they feel.

The theory of "principled negotiation" outlined in *Getting to Yes* offers a useful format for this essay. Although Fisher and Ury stress the importance of understanding the emotions involved in any problem, they caution mediators to separate the problem from the people. They also advise mediators to separate positions from their underlying motives. That is what the librarian does when she discovers that one reader wants fresh air while the other wants to avoid a draft. By identifying the original interests that led to their opposing positions, she is able to find a solution invisible to both. Fisher and Ury describe two more steps that are useful in any conflict resolution: brainstorming a number of options and judging them by objective standards. The options should serve the mutual interests of both parties. The standards for selecting the most promising option should be fair and objective.

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